

SPRING
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Families

WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Beatrix Potter

Animals and Us:
Companionship,
Caring, and
Compassion

 You might think Beatrix Potter was a lonely child. Perhaps you would be right. Beatrix didn't go to school. Instead, she was taught at home by a governess. Her brother, Bertram, was usually away at boarding school. Though Beatrix lived in a large city—London, England—there were no children her parents would let her play with in their neighborhood.

But Beatrix was not as lonely as you might think. She had the friendship she felt for the animals she met on her rambles in the countryside. On family vacations in England's Lake District, Beatrix spent hours out of doors. She brought the countryside back to London by taming wild rabbits as pets. She kept country mice in a cage, and lizards, and snakes, and even a pet bat!

Beatrix drew detailed pictures of the plants and the animals she found. She wanted to know everything about the natural world. She planned to be a scientist when she grew up—but



when Beatrix was young, it wasn't proper for a middle-class girl to have a job, particularly as a scientist. Nevertheless, Beatrix kept studying her friends in the natural world. Her careful sketches helped others make discoveries, and when Beatrix was grown up her loving attention to the natural world earned

her a different kind of success.

In 1893, Beatrix sat down to write a letter to five-year-old Noel, who had been sick in bed for a long time. "I don't know what to write to you," she began, "so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose

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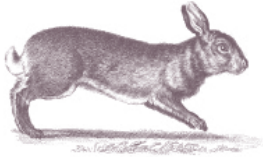
ABOVE: Beatrix (holding Spot), Bertram, and an adult, at Dalguise.
BELOW: Beatrix with Spot.

Photographs ©The Beatrix Potter Society

The Families pages are adapted from Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith development programs.

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names are Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter." She drew Noel a picture of the four young rabbits and their mother. So began the tale of Peter Rabbit, which children have enjoyed for more than a hundred years.

Beatrix wrote and illustrated many more books about the animals that had been her friends in the English countryside: hedgehogs, frogs, ducks, house mice and field mice, and squirrels. She knew them well from spending time among them and observing their ways.

With money from her books, Beatrix bought a farm in the English Lake District, a place she had always loved. She raised sheep on her farm. Over time she bought more country land, and when she died in 1943, she gave four thousand acres to the National Trust, an English organization that protects and preserves beautiful, natural lands. If you travel to England today, you can visit Beatrix Potter's farm house. You can walk in the countryside, just as she did so many years ago when she was a young child.

Yet you need only to open one of her books to meet the animals she loved. 🌸

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EXPLORING TOGETHER



Connections with animals awaken our compassion and deepen our sense of responsibility to all life. To care for a pet can bring a special kind of joy, comfort, and love. If your home does not have a pet, make a bond with animals by working to protect homeless pets or the natural habitats where animals live.

Getting to Know You...

A personal connection to a real animal gives a child a concrete experience of the interdependent web of life and an opportunity to develop empathy. As UUA blogger Michelle Richards writes, sharing "secrets and private thoughts with a special animal friend can encourage a child to develop trusting relationships with others and even help with the development of non-verbal communication skills."

If allergies, busy schedules, or other obstacles prevent pet ownership, help children bond with real animals in other ways.

Some animal shelters and wildlife sanctuaries train young volunteers to work directly with animals.



Take regular walks.

Get to know the habits of this oak tree's mockingbird, that lake's family of swans, or the turtle that always suns itself on the same big rock.



Horse back riding can be a fun leisure activity.
Or what about a job caring for a neighbor's pet?



Capture an Animal!

Draw your pet or a favorite animal in nature. Observe closely, as Beatrix Potter did. Lively pets and quick outdoor animals may not sit still to hold a pose. Try photography!

As a family, enjoy a story about human/animal bonds, such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (a horse), Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (otters), or Patricia Polacco's picture book *Mrs. Katz and Tush* (an urban cat).



Photo of Yuki, parakeet, courtesy of Alicia LeBlanc.

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Drawing of Comet courtesy of M. J. Piregoff.



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Kindly Leave Wildlife Outdoors

Beatrix Potter found animal friends outdoors and sometimes brought them home as pets. A well-known photo shows her out on a stroll with a leashed bunny. However, bringing a pond turtle, field mouse, or other wild creature indoors to live is neither safe, nor kind.

Here are some caring ways to interact with wildlife, from expert Susan Gilchrist:

Put out bird feeders. What different colors and kinds of birds come to feed? Hint: Woodpeckers like suet, gold finches eat thistle seed. Children can mix seed with peanut butter and spread the mixture on pine cones, hang suet in mesh bags, or cut empty plastic soda bottles into feeders. Clean the area regularly, to prevent the spread of disease among the birds. Be sure to continue winter bird-feeding well into spring weather.

Even in a city, you'll find signs of wild animals: a feather, scat droppings, nibbled leaves, a spider's web, holes in the ground, or other animal homes. Go look for tracks of birds, dogs, cats, and people in the snow or mud. Talk about their different kinds of feet. Who is going where? Why?

Even small and seemingly docile animals in the wild can bite or scratch if trapped or provoked. The best approach to wildlife is to keep a safe distance—safe for you and for them. Show your appreciation of wild animals by helping to maintain the places they live. 🌸

Pets & Health

Even in a tight economy, most households in the United States continue to have at least one pet. One reason may be the health benefits. Pet ownership has been shown to reduce blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and feelings of loneliness, while bringing owners more exercise, outdoor activity, and contact with their communities. Children who own pets may grow in self-esteem, responsibility and respect toward other living beings, and enthusiasm for sports, hobbies, clubs, and chores. 🌸

Blessing of the Animals



Gary Higgins, courtesy of The Patriot Ledger.

The Rev. Parisa Parsa blesses Cubie, at First Parish in Milton, Mass., Unitarian Universalist.

Many UU congregations appreciate pets with a special worship and social gathering to which well-behaved animals are very much invited. Join or start a Blessing of the Animals tradition at your congregation. Older children can help plan the event, help owners handle their pets, and make sure there is water. One congregation photographed pets and their owners, set the photos in simple, craft-stick frames, and sold them to families to raise money for a local animal rescue organization.

See the K-1 Tapestry of Faith program “Wonderful Welcome” for more ideas (Session 9, Mutual Caring). 🌸

*We give thanks for the animals
 Who live close to nature.
 Who remind us of the sanctities
 of birth and death.
 Who do not trouble their lives
 with foreboding or grief.
 Who let go each moment as it passes.
 And accept each new one as it comes
 With serenity and grace.
 — Gary Kowalski*

*Spirit of life,
 bless these animals
 who are the companions
 of our lives.
 Hear our outpouring
 of love and gratitude
 for them and help us
 translate that
 into love and gratitude
 for all your creatures.
 — Christine C. Robinson*

Our connections
with animals
help us, sometimes
in unexpected ways.

Let Animals Help Us Share Our Parting Gifts

by Pat Kahn

Whether or not we have a real animal friend in our lives, stories with animal characters can bring powerful growth and healing. This is true for all of us, and especially for children. My friend Natalie Bernstein, a school librarian, says children are more likely to see themselves in a story when the characters are animals. She writes, “Most children are curious about and fond of animals, making them a natural empathetic set of characters with which to identify. I often hear a child respond to an illustration, exclaiming ‘I’m that one!’”

When I served as a religious educator in a congregation, parents frequently asked me for resources to help them talk with children about death. There is one story I always recommended first: *Badger’s Parting Gifts*, by Susan Varley, in which Old Badger dies, and his friends gather to share their memories of things Badger taught each of them, his “parting gifts.”

About ten years ago, I was approached by a young mother who was dying from breast cancer.

She asked me to help plan her memorial service. She wanted to make it, in her words, “kid-friendly.” When I read *Badger’s Parting Gifts* to her, Becky loved the story and wanted the book read during the memorial service. She definitely wanted to approve the eulogy—as she said, it was the last thing she had control over. I was having a great deal of difficulty knowing what to write. Becky suggested I use the story as a starting point. With that, I was able to shape the eulogy around her many “parting gifts” to family and friends.

One day, shortly before her death, I sat with Becky, her husband Bert, and her three sisters as they shared stories of a lifetime. We laughed and cried as we talked about Becky’s parting gifts. I heard stories of Becky the adventurer, Becky the irrepressible, Becky the world traveler, Becky the teacher, Becky the artist, Becky the lover of books, and Becky the mother. At one point Becky said, “This is going to be a great service. I wish I could be there.” And in fact, Becky was. 🌸

FIND OUT MORE

■ **Henry Bergh, a Unitarian**, founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals just after the U.S. Civil War. The Tapestry of Faith program Riddle and Mystery offers a story about Bergh and activities to connect with animals.

■ **The organization Red Rover** offers educational and action programs for all ages, with the aim of “bringing animals out of crisis and strengthening the bond between people and animals”: www.uan.org



■ **Natalie Bernstein’s blog** suggests more books that nurture empathy and compassion in children: <http://thepithypython.blogspot.com>

■ **A therapy dog** (with a human partner) can do more than you think—for example, help a child learn to read or provide comfort at the scene of a disaster. Read a thank-you poem to the dogs of Therapy Dog International for on-site emotional rescue after 9/11 in New York City: www.tdi-dog.org

■ **The Delta Society** promotes “the human-animal health connection”; explore its Pet Partners therapy dog program: www.deltasociety.org

FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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